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ta da!

TREE OF LOVE

A German Easter tradition gives way to the most romantic holiday of the year

BY ELIZABETH MAXSON

THE GERMANS HAVE A WONDERFUL EASTER TRADITION—the Easter Tree. Having lived in Germany for many years, I found this tradition endearing because of its simplicity and constant reminder of the meaning of the season. They would simply take forsythia branches and place them in a large vase and then decorate the “tree” with beautiful and intricately carved Easter ornaments made of wood. The branches would, as expected, bloom completely by Easter Sunday.



Layer different fabrics and table cloths for texture, color and interest.

ta da!

With Valentine's Day being a day of love, I always felt it was a shame that it is only a day. Why not have Valentine's season: a two-week period in which we express our gratitude, love and appreciation for all that we have. Borrowing from the German Easter tree tradition, I created a "Valentine tree" as a lovely reminder of everything for which I am grateful.



My Valentine tree is made from roses, carnations and curly willow branches available in crafts stores and floral shops. I made the tree on the first day of February so that I would have two weeks of constant reminders of my love and gratitude. Valentine trees can be decorated daily with notes of love and appreciation, rolled into scrolls, and tied to the branches, along with little charms.

I cut the carnations and roses and placed them in small water picks (available at floral shops), and then I tied them to the branches with chocolate-colored ribbon. I also added food coloring to the water picks in the carnations and watched as they changed with the color of love—red—as the days passed.



(Right) Tie the flowers on simply. They will need to be removed to refill the picks with water.

(Opposite) I like using only fresh flowers and willow branches. It's nice to have something fresh in the middle of winter when the outdoors is waiting for spring.



Watch as the little scrolls tied to the branches grow in numbers as the days in the Valentine season pass



I found little Valentine charms and silver heart ornaments to hang on the tree, as well. Use your imagination. Have your children cut out paper hearts, decorate them and hang them up on the tree, or tie red lollipops or peppermint sticks for color and fun. Get the whole family involved.

The Valentine tree looks wonderful in a foyer or main entry. Each day, have someone in the family write a little note of gratitude about something or someone they love. Soon, your tree will be filled with love. Watch as the little scrolls tied to the branches grow in number as the days in the Valentine season pass.



(Far left) Use the Valentine charms as gifts for the guests. They also make wonderful necklaces.

(Left) After the day of honor, why not take the rosebuds from the table and give them to your children to give to their teachers or neighbors? A nice surprise for the recipient and a nice lesson on giving for the children.

(Opposite) If you have the space, dress the dining table a week in advance—this adds to the anticipation and makes the table pretty.



Use lots of silver to make an impact. Even tarnished silver looks romantic.



On Valentine's Day, enjoy a family dinner with special place settings. Untie the scrolls from the tree and read them aloud. I set my table with silver, cream and red. I use silver vintage French shoe buckles as napkin rings and place red roses in tiny cordials at each place setting.

Another way to use your Valentine tree is to have a dessert buffet party for the grownups. Add a little fun and have your guests anonymously fill out their scroll by answering one of the following:

- Describe your first kiss
- Describe your first love
- What was the most romantic thing anyone ever said to you?

Read the scrolls aloud and invite your guests to guess who wrote which scroll.



There is no such thing as too much chocolate



Keep the buffet deserts simple. Remember that the gathering is about being with those you care about and love. The food is secondary to the meaning of the Valentine season. Stack cake plates on top of each other to give height and interest.

My Valentine tree takes center stage at my buffet. Simple vintage postcards and note cards add to the décor. A little vintage engagement box is a special place for candy, or use it as a serving dish for almond slivers. And remember, there is no such thing as too much chocolate.

To keep the party from being too glam, I added funny chocolate lips wrapped in red foil. A vintage playing card with the number 14 is a decorative piece to state the day of honor. And a vintage English toast caddy is a useful mint wafer cookie holder.

One final idea: Date each scroll and save them. What a nice gift to give your daughter when she has her own family and her own Valentine tree. Living in the era of cell phones, e-mail, fax machines and Blackberries, the hand-written note is precious. Even more precious is the note written with love—especially when it is to you.

From my house to your house,

Elizabeth

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SEE SHOPPING GUIDE, PAGE 90.

